

INDIGO DYED COMMUNITY: A STUDY ON PHU TAI WOMEN'S WISDOM TO STRENGTHENING THE COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

The paper aimed to study the Indigo dyed community and focused specially on Phu Tai women's wisdom to strengthening the community, who make indigo dyed clothes in the following villages: Ban Nong Khrong, Ban Don Kloy, Ban Na Dee, Ban Kham Kha and Ban Oun Dong of Sakon Nakhon Province. The people of the villages use local wisdom and scientific knowledge to produce the indigo-dyed textile since the remote past and this process perpetuates continuously from generation to generation, such as planting, harvesting, and fermenting indigo, dyeing cotton with indigo water, and weaving the textile by using local loom machinery. The textile product of the community shows the remarkable lifestyles of the community's living in close relation with nature. It also reflects the indigenous people's belief and faith in Buddhism. Today, the indigo-dyed textile product has become the socio-cultural product which brings substantial amount of annual income to many communities living in Sakon Nakhon Province of Thailand. The result of this article found that the indigo dyed cloth knowledge of Phu Tai in Sakon Nakhon had been sustained due to the wisdom of the elderly women living in the community. In 2002, the indigo-dyed cloth was revived and became popular. Its production process consisted of dyeing, pattern creation, and weaving. These three procedures were taught verbally and trained by the elderly women

of the family such as mother, aunt, and grandmother to younger generations. At present, the indigo dyed cloth was well-known as a cultural product of many communities in Sakon Nakhon Province because of its uniqueness. It is the outstanding symbol of women's wisdom inherited from generation to generation. It also represents the particular characteristics of women's learning and socializing culture.

Keywords: Indigo dyed community, Indigo dyed textiles, Phu Tai women's wisdom, strengthening the community, Sakon Nakhon Province, Thailand

INTRODUCTION

"A woman who does not know how to weave and make cloth or textiles is not appropriate to have a husband." This is the proverb of the Isan people and it shows the outstanding role of women in the region along with the reflection of the role and way of thinking about women in the Northeast of Thailand. However, in the post-1957 period, the overall lifestyle and way of thinking of the Isan community was greatly changed due to the impact of these changes have also effected dramatically the factors of production in an agrarian society like Phu Tai of Isan Community living in Sakhon Nakhon Province of Thailand. These social changes resulted the villagers switching to plantation of other economically productive crops as rubber, tapioca, cotton, tobacco, sugarcane, jute, cassava, and corn etc. It has also become an important factor in the in migration of people in search of a new

occupation or trade from the countryside into the city inevitably.

Economic development policy during 1961-1966 focused on increasing the efficiency and quantity of agricultural production. This includes forest reserves with improved transport and communication to facilitate faster transfer. The expansion of the industry leading to promotion of investment is a tool to encourage private sector to operate energy and other utilities that expand reasonably. Trying to complete an existing project is time-consuming because these are all big projects that require a lot of money and manpower. In the commercial sense, there are also goals and policies that will increase the value of output goods in line with the expansion of production. In addition, the promotion of Thai occupation to be more cohesive is appropriate. The Office of the National Economic and Social

Development Board has mentioned the first National Economic and Social Development Plan, (NMP), BE 2504-BE2506, to be the main factor contributing to the migration of migrant workers into the industrial sector, especially weaving organizations, white sugar factories, glass organizations, paper factories, instant food factories, sack factories, tobacco factories, etc. This resulted to the reduction of number of agricultural laborer and weavers while the number of workers in the above industries is steadily growing. Some women are compelled to join the industrial sector due to many circumstances, especially changing socio-economic situation. There were many women migrating from rural to urban areas in search for a job such as being home-based. If a woman is less educated, she may work in the factories available in many urbanized cities and these type profession and working condition compelled many of woman to have relationship with their co-workers or boss, quite contrary to the morality of traditional culture of the community. One of the main reasons for women moving into the cities is that they failed to inherit the traditional trait or occupation from their ancestors or grandparents or such women did not possess the skill of being a weaver or dyer. This resulted to the gradual disappearance of the traditional skill of those women.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

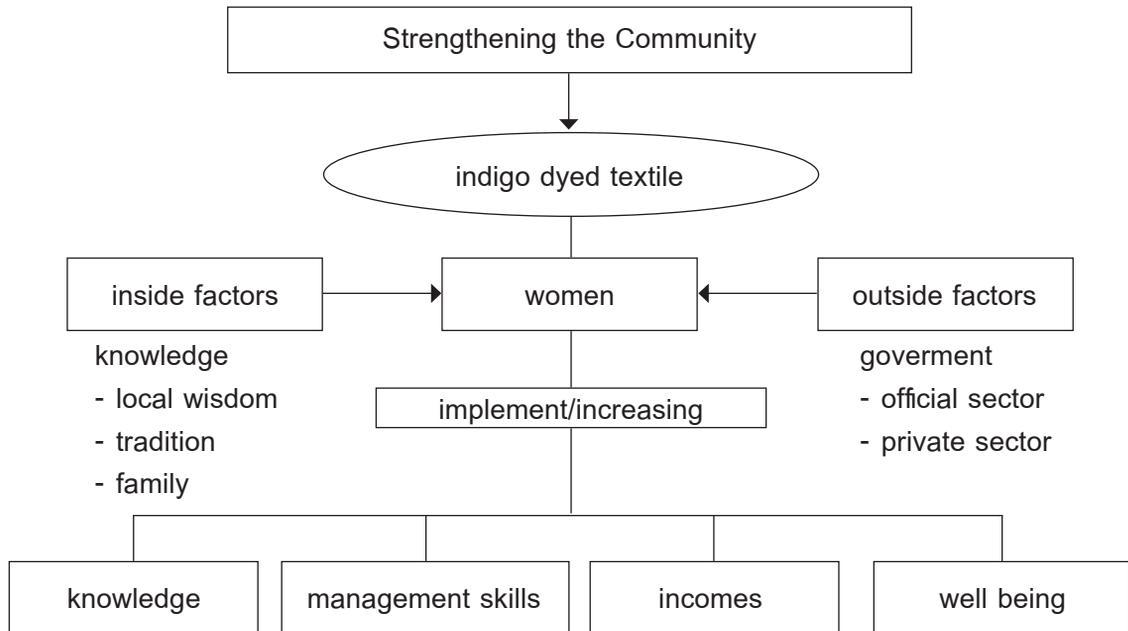
The aims of the study is to study the Indigo dyed community with a special focus on Phu Tai women's wisdom to strengthening the community.

RESEARCH SCOPE

This research attempts to explain the role of women in the application of weaver ancestral wisdom. This wisdom study of Phu Tai women's community is based on the cultural anthropological framework, giving importance to the concepts that help to strengthen the community as: "communities," "weaving," and "the role of women" as a cultural product in the social and cultural context of Sakon Nakhon Province, Thailand. The research is focused on the Tai weaving community, who take care of weaving and indigo dying in the region. There is a group of women who who are engaged in weaving activities in a systematic way, so they can be labelled as community weaving groups. This group bring all its members to self-reliance based on the application of the ancestors' wisdom, and turn them into a strong and self-motivated force, thereby leading their family and community into prosperity. Hence, the scope of the study is modified while the study is being conducted as additional information is collected.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This research has the following conceptual framework:



METHODOLOGY

This research was a qualitative research, focusing on collecting field data from the about indigo dyed communities in the context of social and cultural lifestyles of ethnic Phu Tai living in Sakon Nakhon province. In other words, it is a form of participatory action research targeted in the process of indigo dyed cloth that is embedded as a cultural product and that helps in strengthening the community. The analysis used folklore conceptual framework to analyse the interdisciplinary data.

The field research was conducted through in-depth interviews and participant

observation in order to understand the social phenomena, worldwide and behavior of villagers who inherited the tradition and ritual related with their life and society. It also focused on the context of indigo dyed cloth which is related to the cultural phenomena of Phu Tai women's wisdom.

The researcher collected the data from the population, focusing on the field study at the study area in the villages where the communities of Phanna Nikhom district, Sakon Nakhon produced the indigo dyed cloth from the following areas: Ban Nong Khong, Ban Don Kloy, Ban Na Dee, Ban Kham Kha, Ban Oundmong. To conduct the

participant and non-participants observation, informal interviews with key informants were made. The researcher used the following techniques and tools: 1) Observation: The researcher used the participant observation to observe the culture, community people's lifestyle such as the process of indigo dyeing, weaving, indigo management, participant observation, group discussion with knowledgeable people of the community on the art of indigo dyeing. 2) Interview: The interview was conducted by dividing the key informants into 3 groups as follows: 1) village headman, assistant village headman 2) head of women's group the head of village funds who focused on indigo dyed cloth and 3) officer of provincial community development, officer of district community development, provincial culture and stake holder with a focus on the promotion of indigo dyed as a cultural product of the province. 3) Instruments: The researcher used many instruments as: 1) interview schedule was the main tool used to collect the data by having informal individual interviews. 2) note was also used to record the daily interview with the participants, observation as well as reviewing the daily data from the interviews and 3) audiovisual camera was used to record slide and motion pictures and tape recorders was also used to keep the data in general.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Results

1) Weaving Community People

Traditionally, weaving is a duty of a woman in Phu Thai Community if she refrains from farming. Back in the 50s, many of the villages in the northeast wove textiles as a trait or on important events such as ordination ceremony, marriage ceremony, the Buddhist lent day and *kathin* ceremony. In line with their tradition, the women of the region opted to weave their own clothes, which they used in their daily life with various patterns and attractive designs which they inherited from their ancestors. It can be said that weaving is a skill and tactic of art on women's cloth, and the place where women can show this art is the temple as this is this is the area where people meet and gather to do activities related to Buddhism. Therefore, the temple is an important place to display the potential artwork on fabric since the remote past and this continues till today.

However, due to the impact of the current social change, many communities living in the East are affected, and as a result, this affect can be noticed even in the weaving activity too. Modernization of the garment factory gradually replaced weaving, which is a cultural heritage of the Thai people living in the region since the remote past. There

are many factors which resulted to these changes. The arrival of consumer goods greatly influenced the manner of dressing or selection of clothing garments of the villagers. Traditional woven cotton garments have decreased in popularity and eventually led to the reduction of the number of weavers. The daily traditional role of weaving is reduced to occasional role and this causes to the extinction of weaving equipments as it become unnecessary to the community people. Traditionally, every household of the community owned a weaving equipment. But in the present decade, the weaving equipment such as loom, *ak*, *krasuay*, *hanghen* and *la* became archaic tools. Some people have to burn them for they do not see the value of this folk technology anymore. It can be said that the flow of capitalism has completely transformed the social structure of the countryside and the production of the community. In addition, originally, women were the weavers who prepared for important occasions as a rite of passage. However, with the arrival of modern garments that can be bought easily anywhere, women do not need to weave anymore, thus abandoning the traditional role of self that was originally conceived and inherited. In reflection, the role of traditional cloths was replaced by western cloths and those sold by Chinese merchants.

With the rapid decline of cotton, the area of cotton growing is no longer popular as such the improvements and changes in the area of cotton cultivation to other crops such as sugarcane, tapioca, and rubber. The Cotton Exchange from the grain of the mountain to the lowland areas is no longer visible. Women no longer endure sitting and weaving cotton fabric as the fabrics of western and Chinese traders have a wide variety to choose from. Obsolescence becomes a discourse that pushed cotton weaving to become outdated and obsolete. Anyone wearing cotton and indigo dyed fabrics is considered to be no different from a farmer. The foregoing factors have made several communities in Isan quit weaving all over. Women younger than 40 cannot inherit ancestral wisdom because the weaving trait process essentially requires skills and expertise through teacher training at recognized communities from experts of the craft. In consequence, weaving as a cultural heritage is fast losing its importance.

However, it is fortunate that many communities of the region still have the weaving wisdom. This is due to the fact that many communities living in the region still have ageing teachers, older than 60 years, who have skill and knowledge on the art of weaving. Knowledge and wisdom are nurtured through years of exposure

to weaving from childhood to adulthood. This starts from the practice of observing, grasping, helping out an aunt or sister to eventually practicing the craft on its own. With the passage of time, different weaving styles are recognized. When it comes to studying in the weavers' communities, it is clear that the history of weaving memories is conveyed by women's pride in their ability to become knowledgeable. The system can be transmitted even if it is not recorded in the document, but it is a system of elaboration that also creates new skills into the cloth weaving and dyeing wisdom.

Some fabrics of these communities were invoked by the process of converting their culture as cultural capital. It is a common sight to observe older women of the communities, 50 years and above, weaving clothes in their household basement. So, women weavers living in the community cannot be called as girls as they are advanced in age. Weaving was rebuilt to regenerate the traditional role of women and weaving became a process of value creation rather than weaving for household use. Fabrics that are well-woven are often offered at higher prices. Therefore, weaving



Figure 1 Mrs.Pon Khotprom, the best dyer in the Nong Khrong community

has become a tool for livelihood and income generation for women in the community. The change in thinking is beginning to show a clear picture as the concept of creative economy on the basis of biodiversity and local wisdom becomes a trend. As a result, many communities are transformed into communities of indigo dyed fabric and many communities abandon the charm of being a local community weaver, adapt themselves according to changing fashion trend and turn to produce goods for higher economic value and changing market demand.

The process of textile weaving is simple - weaving indigo dyed fabric as much as they are able to weave and at the same time retain the original design which is considered to be a lasting legacy to pass to their children. In addition, many new patterns are learned from outside neighboring communities through imitation and cultural exchange. Thus, learning and exchanging of ideas as well as new perspectives from the outsiders led to the modernization of the textile village of Sakhon Nakhon Province.

Reintroduction of textile wisdom in Ban Nong Khrong community started in the same way as other communities that existed over 20 years ago. The values of local knowledge and local wisdom are now applied. As a result, the community has come back to look for its own value with a small group of 4-5 women who have had knowledge of weaving. It has sparked the community's spirit leading to strength and prosperity to date. It was found that "Women's Wisdom" empowers the real strength of the community. Women do not only determine the direction of strength and income. They also become managers from the household level to the community level and made "indigo dyed" fabrics to reach a stable point. Now, it is evident that many communities have reflected the image of "strength" that comes from "the intellectual power of women." In fact, the industry is now managed by 90 percent women. It was found that women were mostly in control of the household weaving occupation. On the other hand, men are responsible for facilitating and coordinating the public sector that will contribute to the success of the group.



Figure 2 Indigo pots

2) The role of women in the indigo dyeing community

The social and cultural characteristics of local anthropologists are divided into four categories: the hunting society, the tribal society, the agricultural society, and the industrial society. In each society, there is a clear separation between men and women. The role of women is clearly defined as the main component of agricultural workers. When there is time to abstain from harvesting rice, there is free time for knitting and embroidering. Santasombat (2001) said that in terms of sex discrimination, women in almost every society in the world are entrusted with heavy missions. In tribal societies, women are farm workers. Moreover, they harvest vegetables, gather firewood, cook, manage the household, and raise children. On the other hand,

men hunt or raise animals only. Women, often called 'housewives,' work equally and in many instances, more than men.

Tangtawornsirikul (1998) states that women and maternity require women to possess the knowledge to produce cloth and to manufacture all materials related to the fabric. The produce is used in various rituals such as marriage, philanthropy, and merit making. According to Samuttakupt (1993), the women in Isan must weave at least three cloths into "black blouses" or "silk blouses." Black blouses are woven from cotton and then indigo dyed. Low silk refers to weaving silk yarn, and silk means silk spinning. Women who have the ability to make pillows, blankets, and duvets are considered capable to have a family. It can reflect the identity of the dyer, that is, if the dye is dark, it shows that there is a skill and

wisdom to reproduce. Ruengsuwan (2515) associates the role of women in marriage and the readiness to build a family in the Isan proverb “Any woman who obeys the teachings of the old man is not lazy to know the weaving of silk, the woman will be highly regarded. I believe that this type of women will bring prosperity to the family.”

problem because the low- and middle-class markets are focused on producing indigo dyed fabric according to market popularity. The indigo dyed fabric became a repetitive and unmarketable product. The crisis is called “saturation” of indigo dyed fabric. Only a few weavers can develop their own products into high-end and GI-certified products.



Figure 3 indigo dyed weaving and tools

The indigo dyed fabric has transformed the lifestyle of the villagers. Weavers (producers) need to change their production paths in order to respond to the rapidly changing trend. It is acknowledged that the business returns that result from the popularity of local fabrics combined with the tradition of natural and environmentally friendly production makes the indigo fabric to become a cultural product that quickly surpasses silk. However, it also became a double-edged sword that triggered the dye

This problem, if viewed in the middle and upper markets' perspective, will inevitably look unclear. However, when looking back at the community as an upstream producer, it is found that the problem is due to too much production cost that sometimes requires the fabrics to be sold in relatively small quantities, reduce the price and cover cost of production. This has led to several groups of producers stopping weaving operations. There is no capacity to deliver products to the primary market. And at the same time,

it is not true of the production process. The villagers, in their capacity as production agents, need to turn themselves into sellers or processors. The above-mentioned factors may lead to the problem in the production process and standard of production of indigo dyed fabric in many communities. This may lead to problems at the provincial level, which should be taken into account in controlling the production of indigo dyed cloth.

bad luck. On occasions like Boon Prawes, Boon Khawphansa, Boon Okphansa, Boon Khawpradapdin, and Boon Kathin, children, mothers, daughters, and grandmothers wear sarong cloth made of the delicacy of handcrafted fabrics to socialize in temples. However, the social transformation of woven fabrics has meant to taking away this social privilege from women. With the changing world and the inflow of capitalism, production



Figure 4 Role of women in the culture of indigo dyeing

As mentioned above, the development of the role of women in the culture of indigo dyeing starts with observing, memorizing, practicing, and attaining proficiency. It is possible to combine the original knowledge from the female ancestors to create the cloth used in daily life. But, occasionally it is used to show social status especially during monkhood and merit making traditions, such as merit making ceremony to ward off

process using folk technology and folk wisdom are interrupted. Local currents are being squeezed into less space. But it is interesting to know as how the society and the world change which can be seen through historical analysis. Chathiphot (2017) reported that “The knowledge and wisdom of woven cloth is dependent with the power of women.” It is wonderful to note that grandmothers still remember what they

used to do in the remote past, even after an interruption of over 30-40 years. This inherited set of knowledge is the origin and beginning of the current indigo dyed cloth wisdom. Many communities have used the process of resurrecting wisdom from the past memory and history. They use the experience of knowledgeable people who have a clear set of knowledge and deep knowledge of the craft. It is a community of learning. On the whole, it is observed that we can continue to work on dyed indigo fabrics and bring the community forward to prosperity through the strength of wisdom.

3) From grandma's grandmother's wisdom to a variety of women's skills

When discussing the wisdom of women, it is undeniable that "weaving" is one of their important works. Although the world is changing, the important role of a woman's womb remains. The process of transferring this knowledge is scientifically organized, as such through initial observation, then

practice. Creating one's expertise eventually comes from the continued immersion to the craft.

The practice of girls on weaving as mentioned above is supported by Chathiphot (2015) who states that girls are trained to familiarize themselves with cotton since childhood especially separating cotton and using cotton wheel. The process of cotton picking is the hardest. It takes a lot of training. The weight of the hand is an important factor to the skill considered to be using both the theme of science and art. The pace of hand release and distance of the foot from the line are as significant. Fiber consistency is noteworthy at this stage, so it is important to use both physical and artistic skills to proceed to the next step. In order to understand this, the researcher explains the patterns of line and ridges before the weaving process. It is the formation of the loops to create a vertical line and to create a horizontal line as follows:

Table 1 The process of weaving in Thailand

vertical line		horizontal line	
procedures	equipment	procedures	equipment
removing cotton seeds from cotton	cotton yarn	removing cotton seeds from cotton	cotton yarn
making a fluffy cotton	may deed fay	making a fluffy cotton	may deed fay
making cotton into round pieces	Khan tong	making cotton into round pieces	Khan tong
making cotton into fiber	La	making cotton into fiber	La
Sorting cotton	May pia	Bundle of cotton	Lak Mee
dyeing cotton	dyeing potter	Mudmee or Ikat	Lak Mee
cotton spinning	Ak	dyeing	dyeing potter
put cotton to vertical lines	Lak Fhue	break out Mee	knife
vertical cotton cross the beginning of the cotton weaving	harness and reed loom	spin cotton weaving	cotton twine tool shuttle weaving made of hardwood

From table 1 above, it is found that the steps to make a fabric are complex. It is essential to acquire the knowledge and skills from an experienced teacher regarding the practice and knowledge of using the devices such as working procedure, color combination chemistry, dyeing process, mixing the raw materials to get the desired color and so on. Regarding the color suitability, it is suitable for dyeing any material like cotton and silk. Geometry as well as basic mathematics can be found

from cotton padding used to calculate the size and length of the cloth like calculation of cotton per kilogram of dyeing and sperm counting. Shapes also require understanding of arts and supernatural knowledge of the relationship of life with society. Thus, it can be said that "fabrics and weaving" are handicrafts that include "science" and "art" together. It's not wrong to agree with this statement. "The weaving process is like the socialization process that women ancestors inherit and create in the soul of women."

4) Indigo women and woven fabric:
Strengthening the community with dyed
fabrics

The impact of the indigo dyeing community in the area of research in Phanna Nikhom is remarkable. What is clearly reflected in the indigo dyed fabric work is that women are the important driving force because of the role they play in weaving. Likewise, they can find a way to earn a living through their craft. The power to change a crisis to an opportunity is commendable. The power of their craft can be turned into the power of the community to make better lives for their families.

The researcher observed and participated in the weaving activities of the mother in the house. Around 4-5 months before the beginning of farming season,

many households would weave clothes in the house. Each household had different ways to weave. Some weaved silk, some cotton.

The indigo dyed and indigo weaving became popular in Thailand in the year 2007. There are several chapters that initiate dyeing with indigo. This activity has encouraged many looms to come back to initiate local weavers to wake up early in the morning, to dye indigo every day. Some people have to wake up to fire the first steam and then start weaving from nighttime while men have to bring cattle from the stable to work in the field. These images are very evident in communities that are not yet technologically advanced. The community does not accelerate itself by the stream but tries to adapt to changes in their own way.



Figure 5 Learning by practicing of indigo dyed cloth

Weavers have clearly shown that “women” are important driving mechanism. This mechanism is behind the system of “socialization” that is passed on from generation to generation. Women learn together. They gather in small groups and talk about their aspirations for their families. *I want the family to eat well. I want to have enough income to live.* These have been told by many women and many assured themselves that they can be self-employed and depend on weaving as an alternative

source of income. Fortunately, it was found that woven cloth could be sold under government control. From then on, the craft has slowly grown into a sustainable livelihood. The members of the group who are experts in weaving are also trying their hand at crafting. Design patterns are taught by an adult relative who specializes in fine arts. Each pattern they come up with is inspired by life events like a story from the community told on a cloth. Each cloth is beautiful and meaningful in itself.



Figure 6 Modern cultural products of indigo dyed and creative pattern

Women become a key component of community empowerment. Weaving and indigo are two factors that lead the community to success and strength. The “power of women” is not just about physical ability. It is the “inner force” that tries to drive and push to achieve a goal. Women play an important role in determining the direction of community’s development equally with men especially in terms of family-level policies and economic policies of the community. Apparently, there is effort to communicate with the outside society to create an economic movement. Negotiation is on-going process to reach more customers not just in the community level but extending to those in regional level and overseas. There are a number of communities that work on indigo dyeing as foreign negotiators through different channels like brokers and media, influencing the business to be brought directly to foreign customers. The revenue and its distribution are clear to the community. A part of the revenue goes to paying farming debts. The craft is contributing greatly to the sustainability of the community.

CONCLUSION

Weaving is a culture inherited from ancestors. The Phu Tai people used to practise weaving to abstain from farming. The primary purpose of weaving was to accumulate clothing and necessities for the next season. Weaving was neglected and disappeared by changing times and due to the impact of social change. Many women abandoned weaving, heading to the city to work in factories. As a result, many communities lost their weavers and lost their weaving knowledge.

However, when invoked by the wisdom of weaving, many communities needed time to adapt. There were a number of women who could weave, but many of the necessary skills in resurrecting weaving and dyeing were gone. When the government found that weaving could be developed and upgraded into a career, weaving was encouraged again. Now, women play a more active role in the indigo dyeing community, which is widespread in the community. Many communities are converging to produce woven fabrics for sale, earning income for their family.

In the past, indigo dyed fabric was not worth the cost. Mudmee or Ikat (is a dyeing technique used to pattern textiles that employs resist dyeing on the yarns prior to dyeing and weaving the fabric.) pattern was often shown in simple shapes as in nature, trees, animals, and sacred animals in Buddhism. The fabric in the past symbolized women's duty. Current styles include shapes and shades, which are often defined by the buyer. Therefore, the weavers need to adjust according to the needs of the buyers such as the color that blends indigo and other bark, examples, mango tree, ebony tree, commonly preferred by consumers. Today's indigo dyed fabric does not emphasize mudmee but emphasizes simplicity and modern design.

Women who manage weaving in the community must also adapt and apply the necessary knowledge to understand and the mechanisms of the market including networking with other weaving communities and knowing the consumers of the indigo dyed market. It is a good opportunity for the provincial government to promote the walking street, which is the meeting place between the weavers and the shoppers, where the latter can witness the actual process of dyeing indigo fabrics. However, it is a complicated and long-lasting process.

For as long as the weavers continually meet to exchange ideas, patterns of indigo dyed fabrics will continue to grow in number. Otherwise, the craft may lead to a dying crisis. In this case, the women in the indigo dyeing community have been tricked into adding value from indigo to other products. Some weavers also use fabric to make home decors and accessories desirable to the market, especially among teenagers.

In conclusion, the strength of the women in the indigo dyeing community is built on the wisdom of craftsmanship. The wisdom of this woven fabric has been passed on to generations and is reinforced by the support and promotion of public and private organizations making the process of dyed indigo fabrics to become widely recognized. The most important thing is to make a stable income for the family. Most women in the indigo dyeing community have a common idea. *"Indigo fabric is an asset of genuine wisdom of women."*

DISCUSSION

The research study the local Indigo dyed community, focused specially on Phu Tai women's wisdom to strengthen the community. This has led to the strengthening of the Textile Community in Sakon Nakhon. In addition, the result of the study clearly shows that the Phu Tai women in many

communities have the valuable wisdom, which their ancestors have passed on to later generations. They have learned to apply their experiences and wisdom even in the current context. It is an important and practical way to create the value of the local wisdom. The strength of the community may not be achieved by preserving and treating the value of the indigo dyed only but the selection and use of indigo dyed which create economic value to bring benefit to their family, community and society.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. This study should extend to study the factors that affect the accomplishment of women in the weaving community and also their contributions, socially and economically.

2. Research results should be extended to other groups in the community employing the community empowerment approach from case study of indigo dyed cloth.

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